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GARBAGE GAZETTE

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Keeping Mercury Out of Our Waste Facilities

Mercury (Hg) is a problem in the environment and for human health. At least some of this problem can be traced to human activities. Elemental mercury vaporizes at room temperature. If spilled, vaporized and inhaled, mercury can be toxic to the central nervous system. When emitted into the air and then deposited into waterbodies, mercury can be converted by bacteria into organic mercury, or methylmercury, and taken up by fish. Freshwater fish absorb mercury deposited in water bodies from the air.

Certain species of fish in freshwater bodies in Connecticut have elevated methylmercury levels. When people or animals eat these fish, adverse impacts may result. For example, consumption of mercury has been shown to cause neurological damage and to inhibit reproduction in animals like loons and minks.

The Connecticut Department of Public Health and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection have issued a statewide fish consumption advisory for mercury. At risk groups (pregnant women, children under six and women planning to become pregnant within one year) are advised not to eat bass and pickerel from Dodge Pond, Lake McDonough, Silver Lake, and Lake Wyassup. All others are advised to limit consumption to one meal per month of fish from these waterbodies. All are advised to limit their consumption of all species of fish except trout to one meal per month for all other freshwater bodies in Connecticut.



Although the Hg cycle is not entirely understood, we do know that the incineration of Hg-containing products and spills of elemental mercury add to the levels of mercury in the environment. In 1999 the DEP Emergency Response Division received 203 reports of mercury spills. Most of these were reports of broken thermometers, but several were in schools. This is of great concern, as mercury spills are difficult and expensive to clean up. According to EPA, waste combustion is a primary source of Hg emissions in the Northeast. Because CT incinerates most of its waste, it is especially important that our residents be careful regarding disposal of mercury-containing products.

Mercury is found in a number of consumer products including thermostats, thermometers, switches, certain button cell batteries, and fluorescent lights. Some of these products, such as energy-efficient fluorescent lights, must contain at least a small amount of mercury in order to operate properly. Others, such as fever thermometers, have effective non-mercury-containing substitutes. Consumers should select non-mercury-containing products when available, buy the lowest effective mercury containing product when no alternative is available, and dispose of items containing mercury at household hazardous waste collections so that these items can be recycled or properly disposed. Because they are so frequently broken, people who have mercury fever thermometers should replace them with an alcohol based thermometers or some other non-mercury thermometer as soon as possible.

In addition to the health advisory mentioned above, Connecticut has proactively undertaken a series of initiatives to begin to address the mercury problem. The Legislature required the elimination of mercury from packaging (1990) and restricted the level of mercury in alkaline batteries (1992). The DEP permitted a facility that recycles fluorescent bulbs. State regulations require solid waste incinerators to meet a strict standard for mercury emissions (RCSA Section 22a-174-38). The University of Connecticut's Environmental Research Institute has monitored mercury concentrations

in fish tissue and is tracking levels of mercury deposition through a statewide ambient air monitoring network. Governor John Rowland hosted a regional Mercury Summit in January 1999 to generate ideas for reducing and recycling mercury-containing wastes. Then in November, the Council on Environmental Quality issued a report promoting the removal of all mercury-containing products from the waste stream.

Recognizing that removing mercury from the waste stream is a regional issue, the DEP has worked with other northeast states and Canadian provinces on legislative concepts to further the Governors' and Premiers' goal of "the virtual elimination of anthropogenic mercury releases in the region." The concepts include prohibiting the sale of elemental mercury to the public, removing elemental mercury from schools, phasing out non-essential mercury-containing products, requiring labeling and collection of mercury-containing products, and banning the sale of mercury-containing novelties and apparel. The draft concepts can be viewed on the Northeast Waste Management Officials Association web site at www.newmoa.org/Newmoa/htdocs/prevention/hottopics.cfm.

And The Winners Are...



The third annual America Recycles Day is now history. Over 2.9 million pledges were collected nationwide. Two national youth prizes were awarded this year. All other pledges will be kept for next December's drawing for the new millenium home. Mark Dixon of Granite City, IL, a 4th grade student at Holy Family Catholic School won the computer prize. Mark will receive a remanufactured personal computer for himself and 25 additional remanufactured computers that he will donate to his school. The computers are provided courtesy of Resource Concepts, a Texas computer remanufacturer.

Eva Keshishian of Los Angeles, CA., a 5th grade student at Cheremoya School in Los Angeles won the Disney vacation, which consists of a 2-night trip for 4 to the Walt Disney World Resort, including 8 Walt Disney World Theme Park passes. The Disney Resort accommodations and park passes are provided courtesy of the Walt Disney Company. The prize includes round trip airfare donated by the Solid Waste Association of North America. Watch next month's Gazette for a complete listing of winner's from Connecticut's drawing.

Upcoming Meetings

19th Annual Recycling Congress and Exposition, sponsored by the National Recycling Coalition will be held from September 11-13, 2000 in Charlotte, North Carolina. For more information contact the NRC at 1727 King Street, Suite 105, Alexandria, VA 22314. (703) 683-9025.

National Pollution Prevention Roundtable, will be held March 21-24, 2000 at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel, Boston, Massachusetts. For more information contact NPPR, 2000 P Street NW, Suite 708, Washington, D.C. 20036 (202) 466-P2P2.

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